



Photo: S. C. Nash

The 11.37 a.m., the last passenger train from Grain, approaching Stoke Junction on December 2, with "H" class 0-4-4 tank engine No. 31324

Railway twilight in the Hundred of Hoo

By H. A. VALLANCE

THE closure to passengers on Monday, December 4, 1961, of the branch from the North Kent line of the Southern Region at Hoo Junction, $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles east of Gravesend to Grain, marked the end of a chapter in the long history of the railway in the isolated peninsula bounded by the estuaries of the Thames and the Medway. For the short offshoot of this line from Stoke Junction to Allhallows-on-Sea, opened less than thirty years ago, the final chapter ended on December 4 with complete closure.

A railway to serve this district, which is still known by its picturesque Saxon name of the Hundred of Hoo, was projected as long ago as 1865, when a local company obtained powers for the

North Kent Extension Railway, on the route of the present branch, and terminating at a pier on the Medway, opposite Sheerness. Inability to raise the whole of the necessary capital prevented the company from constructing its line, and the powers were allowed to lapse.

Some ten years later, the scheme was partly revived by another local undertaking, the Hundred of Hoo Railway Company, which was authorised on July 7, 1879, to build a line from Hoo Junction to the village of Stoke, a distance of nine miles. Powers for a $3\frac{1}{4}$ -mile extension to the Medway, at the eastern end of the peninsula (known as the Isle of Grain), were obtained on August 2, 1880, and in the course of the next year the

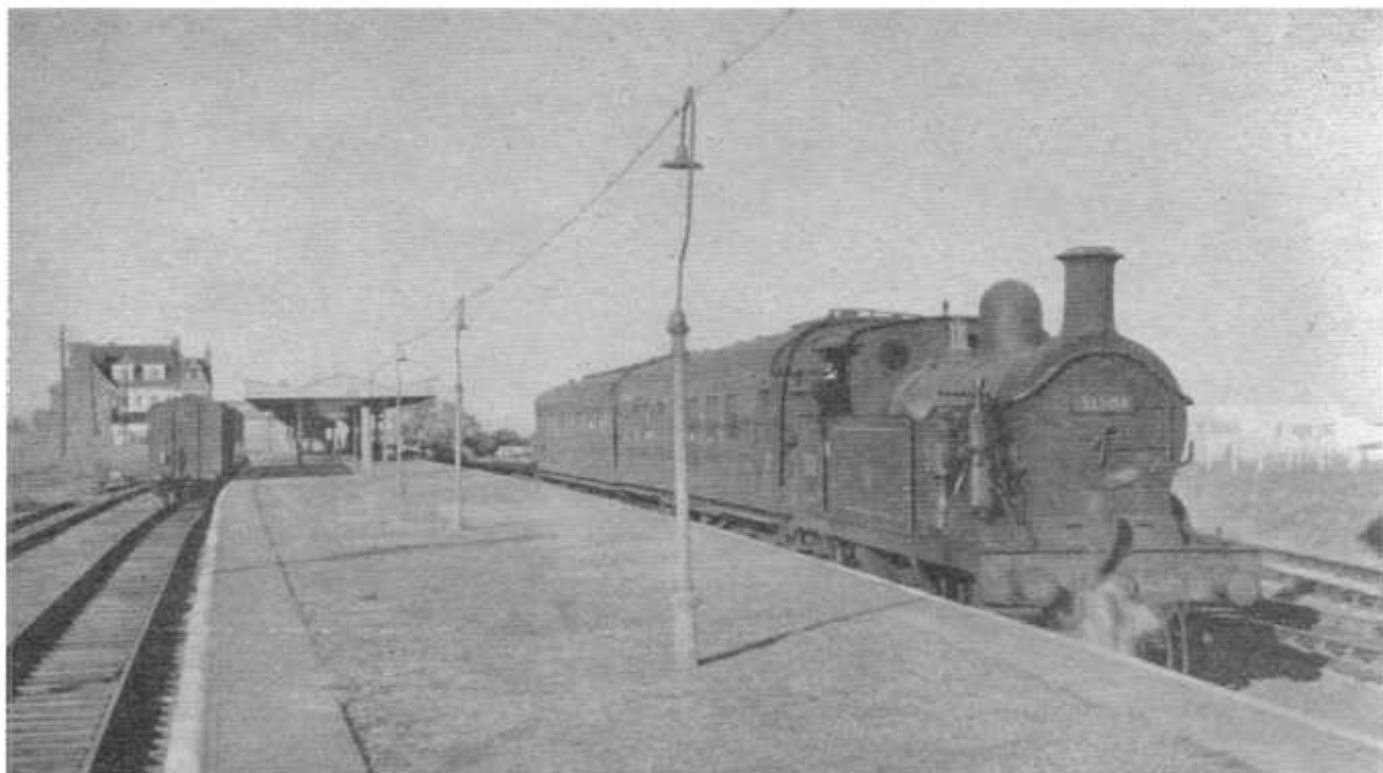
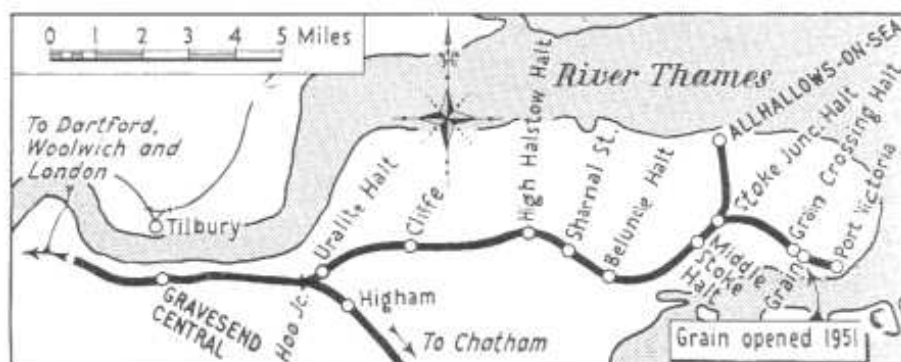


Photo: W. S. Sellar
 Pull-and-push train,
 headed by "H" class
 tank No. 31308, at All-
 hallows-on-Sea on Octo-
 ber 28, 1961

Map of the railways in
 the Hundred of Hoo



South Eastern Railway absorbed the local company.

The railway was opened to Sharnal Street, six miles from Hoo Junction, on March 31, 1882, and extended to a pier on the Medway some five months later, on September 11. It was single throughout, but enough land was taken for the line to be doubled, and some of the works were made wide enough for two tracks. The new terminus was named Port Victoria, in honour of the reigning Sovereign, and a connection with Sheerness (Town Pier) was provided by a ferry, for which two paddle steamers, the *Myleta* and the *Edward William*, were purchased. The distance from London to Sheerness by the new route was about 42 miles, compared with 52 miles by the branch of the London, Chatham & Dover Railway from Sittingbourne.

The choice of the name Port Victoria for a ferry-railhead on the estuary of the Medway indicated a far deeper significance for the new line than competition for Sheerness traffic. Sir Edward Watkin, the Chairman of the South Eastern, was envisaging the development of the site as a port for large sea-going ships. Such

a port would have been within easy reach of London, but would have saved shipping the long and frequently slow passage up the Thames. Moreover, as a port for continental traffic, it would have been outside the agreement, signed many years earlier, between the South Eastern and the London, Chatham & Dover Railways. A pier for continental traffic already had been built by the L.C.D.R. at Queenborough, on the other side of the Medway.

Efforts to develop Port Victoria as a port for continental traffic, or for ocean-going ships, failed, and the amount of traffic by the ferry to and from Sheerness was never heavy. In September, 1895, the boats were withdrawn for the winter months, and thereafter operated during the summer only. For the time being, the winter train services terminated at Sharnal Street, but subsequently some trains ran through to Port Victoria, mainly for the convenience of members of the Royal Corinthian Yacht Club, whose premises adjoined that station. This arrangement ceased when the ferry was withdrawn permanently in the autumn of 1900. Two years earlier, the

ruinous competition and rivalry between the S.E.R. and the L.C.D.R. had been ended by an agreement for working the two systems as one, which came into force on January 1, 1899.

In July, 1900, Queenborough Pier was destroyed by fire, and the ships plying to and from Flushing were hurriedly transferred to Port Victoria. The trains in connection with these sailings continued to use Holborn Viaduct Station, and ran *via* Woolwich and Gravesend. The pier at Queenborough was partly re-opened in February, 1901, but the night service to and from Holland continued to use Port Victoria until May, 1904.

After this spell of activity, the line relapsed into its role of an unimportant branch, serving a sparsely-populated agricultural area, but a few years later, the establishment of oil refineries and other works provided additional sources of traffic. Originally, the only intermediate stations were at Cliffe and Sharnal Street, but in the summer of 1906 halts were opened at Uralite, High Halstow, Beluncle, Middle Stoke, and Grain Crossing.

The station at Port Victoria was on the pier, and was built wholly of timber. In the course of time, the structure became seriously weakened by the attacks of marine worms, and in 1916 the seaward end was barricaded off, and traffic

Excursion to Allhallows, headed by "H" class tank No. 31520, leaving Sharnal Street Station

Photo: Derek Cross

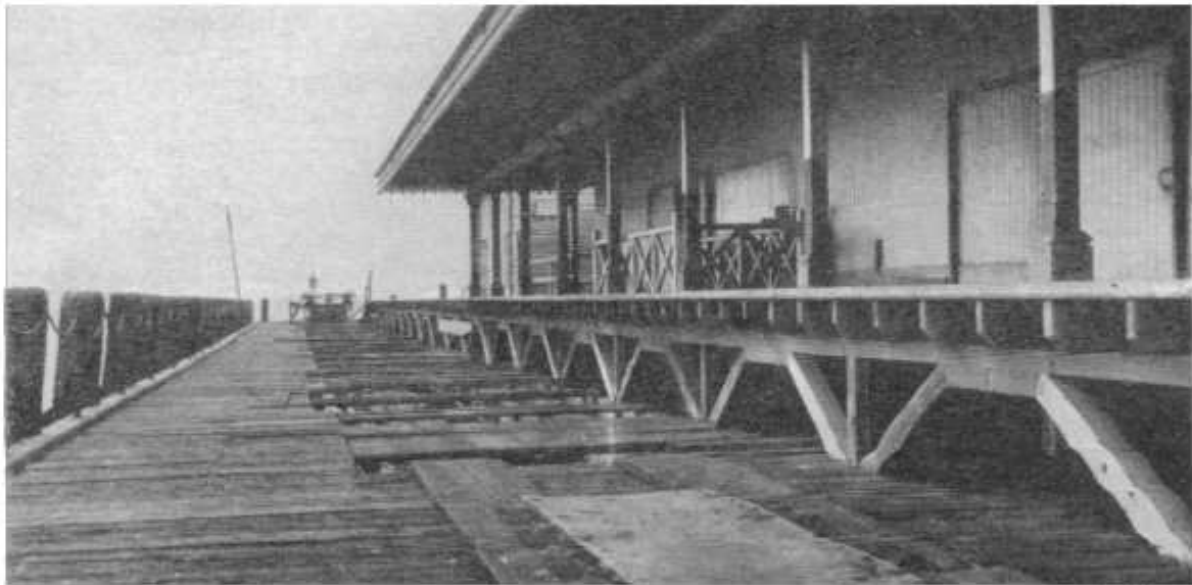
conducted at a shortened platform. It was with these reduced facilities that the ferry to Sheerness had to be hurriedly restored on December 27, 1922, after a ship had collided with the Kings Ferry Bridge carrying the branch from Sittingbourne to Sheerness over the Swale, which separates the Isle of Sheppey from the mainland. Additional trains were run to and from Port Victoria in connection with these emergency services, which continued for about three months.

The pier eventually became so weakened that the shortened platform could no longer be used. At first, it was proposed to build a new station, complete with all offices, on the shore at the end of the pier, but the lightness of the traffic was a decisive factor against this scheme. In 1931, a short wooden platform, entirely devoid of shelter or buildings, was opened, but some of the offices on the pier remained in use.

Some two years earlier, a land-development company had laid out a large building estate at Allhallows-on-Sea, about two miles north of Port Victoria, and in June, 1929, powers were obtained to serve this area with a branch from the Hundred of Hoo line half a mile east of Middle Stoke Halt. Construction began in August, 1931, and the new line, which was $1\frac{3}{4}$ miles long, was opened on May 14, 1932. A single-platform station was provided at Allhallows. A new halt was opened at Stoke Junction in the summer of 1932.

Attempts to develop Allhallows as a





Photos: H. A. Vallance

Port Victoria pier and the original station in 1928, and (below) the seaward end of the pier after removal of the track

new seaside residential area were not successful, and through coaches attached to two fast morning trains to London, and corresponding evening return services, introduced in the summer of 1932, were soon withdrawn. On the other hand, the sandy shore proved popular with day trippers, especially at weekends. The number of trains to and from Allhallows was increased, but the service to Port Victoria was reduced to two trains in each direction, at times suitable for the men employed at the nearby oil refineries. The derelict pier was damaged by fire and demolished in the second world war.

The Allhallows branch, which had been built as a single track, apart from a crossing loop at the junction, was doubled in 1935. The traffic capacity of the line between Hoo Junction and Stoke Junction was increased by the provision of fully-equipped crossing loops, and separate

up and down platforms, at Cliffe and Sharnal Street. Both these stations originally had a crossing loop and only one platform, but the signalbox at Cliffe had been closed for many years, and the down side of the loop had been converted into a siding.

The oil refineries in the Isle of Grain were considerably enlarged after the end of the second world war, and additional land, extending from the shore almost to Grain Crossing Halt, on both sides of the railway was taken for this purpose. Port Victoria Station and Grain Crossing Halt were closed on September 4, 1951, and replaced by a new station, named Grain, about 400 yd. east of the halt. This development brought additional goods traffic to the railway, but passenger



Photo: Derek Cross

traffic at the new station declined. Traffic on the Allhallows branch also decreased, as more visitors travelled by road. The line was reduced to single track in 1957.

When the halts were opened in 1906, the four- and six-wheel coaches previously used on the branch were replaced by some former L.C.D.R. eight-wheel vehicles. These were connected by vestibules, enabling the guard to pass through the train to issue and collect tickets at the unstaffed halts. Later, pull-and-push sets were introduced, to avoid running round at Gravesend and Port Victoria. Recently, goods traffic has been worked by type "3" diesel-electric locomotives; and these also were to be seen on passenger services.

Railway enthusiasts paying farewell visits to the line brought a considerable influx of traffic on the last two days of passenger operation. A typical instance was provided on Saturday, December 2, by the 10.32 a.m. train from Gravesend (composed of a two-coach pull-and-push set, worked by "H" class 0-4-4 tank engine No. 31324), on which practically every seat was occupied throughout the journey to Allhallows. Photographers were much in evidence, and at least one had come equipped with a ciné camera and a portable tape recorder. All this activity contrasted sharply with the paucity of local traffic to and from the intermediate stations and halts.

From Allhallows, the train proceeded to Grain (reversing at Middle Stoke Halt) to form the final service from that station

Train from Gravesend to Allhallows, hauled by "C" class 0-6-0 No. 31510, at Stoke Junction on Whitsun Monday, 1960

at 11.37 a.m. This was an emergency working, necessitated by delay to the train which should have run empty from Gravesend to take up this duty. Although Grain saw its last passenger service on the Saturday morning, trains continued to run to and from Allhallows until the evening of Sunday, December 3.

When the chequered history of Port Victoria is recalled, it must not be forgotten that for several years it was the custom for Royalty to use that route when travelling to or from Germany or Scandinavia. The last of these journeys was made in 1911, when the Emperor of Germany visited London. At first sight, it may seem strange that this out-of-the-way port, with its small pier, should have been chosen for these journeys, but the probable explanation is that it was appreciably nearer to London than Queenborough.

Although the line continues to carry goods traffic, it provides yet another instance of the inability of a branch in a completely rural area, and with inconveniently-situated stations, to cater successfully for passengers under present-day conditions. The failure of Port Victoria to develop satisfactorily relegated the branch to a very humble status; and when, many years later, Allhallows-on-Sea did not become a popular residential district, the line was left without a future.